

TOPOGRAPHIC BORDER CROSSING IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND MUKOMAWA NGUGI'S *NAIROBI HEAT*

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Abstract

This paper is a critical examination of topographic border crossing in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*, using Johan Schimanski's Topographic Border theory rooted in Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe's Border Poetics and Lee Everette's Push and Pull framework. Despite attracting significant scholarly attention, these transnational novels have not been adequately interrogated from the approach adopted in this study. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the study interrogates the experiences of Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Ishmael in *Nairobi Heat*, shedding light on the complexities of migration. Findings reveal that the novels effectively illustrate the push factors that drive migration, the pull factors that attract immigrants, and the intricacies faced by immigrants in their host countries. This study contributes meaningfully to the field of border studies in literature, enhancing our understanding of the complexities of migration and border crossing.

Keywords: Migration, topographic border crossing, border theory, Push and Pull theory.

Introduction

Border poetics is defined in Wilson and Donnan as a "field made up of many fields and yet no one field in particular". Border poetics constitutes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that investigates the manifestations of borders and their impacts on the lived experiences of human subjects within a narrative context. As esteemed scholars in the field of border studies, Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe conceptualised border poetics as a critical framework that scrutinises the complexities of crossing physical or symbolic borders, thereby illuminating the nuanced experiences of border-crossing and their far-reaching implications (Border Poetics De-limited, 2007).

Border poetics is a literary and cultural study that investigates the interconnections of literature, culture, and politics within the framework of border studies. It investigates how literary and cultural texts reflect and alter our perceptions of borders, migration, identity, and citizenship. Border poetics examines how literary works and cultural creations (such as poetry, fiction, art, and music) reflect and

challenge mainstream narratives about borders, migration, and identity. It also studies how border cultures and literatures navigate themes such as identity, belongingness, citizenship, and nationality. Border poetics seeks to increase our understanding of the complex forces at work in border regions and communities by investigating the cultural and literary components of border experiences. Although scholarly researchers (e.g. Nkama and Mbagwu; Bie Precious; Isiwu Chinazaekpere, Nnaemeka Ezema etc.) had examined Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* through various critical lenses, a significant research gap persists in the area of topographic border analysis through the framework of border poetics. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by applying the border poetic and Lee Everette's Push and Pull frameworks to investigate topographic borders in the selected texts.

This study delineates its scope to exploring migration as manifestations of topographic border crossing in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*, which are the present study's primary texts. By applying the Border Poetic framework to these literary works, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to the field of border studies, offering a novel approach to literary analysis and providing a valuable resource for future scholars. The research will, thus, be guided by the idea that migration is a form of topographic border crossing. By investigating this concept through the critical lenses of Johan Schimanski's Topographic theory which is an aspect of Border Poetics and Lee Everette's Push and Pull concept, this study seeks to illuminate the complex dynamics of border crossing and the ways in which literary texts represent and shape our understanding of border experiences.

Literature Review

Arguably, different scholars had through different critical lenses interrogated the two novels in respect to their main themes. For instance, Nkama and Mbagwu used Paul Ricoeur's dialectical hermeneutics of faith and suspicion, and investigated the notion of truth as a symbolic construct in *Nairobi Heat*. Their research was guided by three primary objectives: to identify truth as a symbolic construct; to analyse the symbol of truth through the hermeneutics of faith; and to examine the symbol of truth using the hermeneutics of suspicion. The central thrust of their inquiry lies in the symbolic conception of truth and its significance in generating multiple layers of meaning within the text. Similarly, Bie Precious explored the multiplicity of meaning in *Nairobi Heat* through the analytical lens of Actantial narrative schema, a theory developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, a structural semiotician. Bie Precious explained that the meaning of signs proceeds its communication (Bie 53), and further advanced that an "actant is a class of actors whose members have identical relationships in the aspect of the telos that constitute the principle of the fabula". She identified the characters and their roles in the text as structural signs in the narrative, focused on obtaining the object of the text which is the truth behind the murder of Macy Jane.

Nnaemeka Ezema used Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical framework and Arjun Appadurai's concept of globalisation for a critical examination of the portrayal of globalisation and its cultural expressions in eight selected African novels. In his analysis of *Nairobi Heat*, Ezema emphasised the importance of investigating transnational criminal networks and their negative impacts on Africa's socio-cultural landscape. He claims that the transnational implications of criminal activity had created a sense of abandonment and hopelessness, as seen in the text's depiction of Africa and its cultural identity. Meanwhile, Ugwueze Peace employed John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's Attachment Theory to investigate the phenomena of return migration and homesickness in *Nairobi Heat*. Her analysis showed that returning migrants often confront a complex array of considerations, including altercations in the political, economic, and social landscapes of their home countries. These changes can significantly influence their decisions to return, as well as their experiences upon repatriation. Ugwueze noted that various factors, including discrimination, social isolation, and the acquisition of new knowledge about the home country can contribute to the decision to return. Thus, Ugwueze sheds light on the complex dynamics of return migration and the emotional experiences of migrants.

Similarly, Ajibola Opeyemi examined the impacts of migration on female characters in *Americanah*, and noted that female migrant characters occupy a liminal space, poised at a critical juncture of multiple possibilities, where growth and stagnation, life and death, converge (Ajibola 27). Through the critical lens of postcolonial feminist theory, Ajibola critiqued the intersectional experiences of female migrants who have socio-political issues, (e.g. oppression, marginalisation, gender discrimination, etc.) to deal with. It was observed that these socio-political issues were motivated by the migrants' races, genders, and immigration statuses, resulting in their vulnerability. Thus, an understanding of the complex challenges faced by female migrants was underscored.

Also, Isiwu Chinazaekpere conducted a character analysis of *Americanah* by employing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory to illuminate the complex development of characters and the formation of their identities. Through this theoretical perspective, the various defence mechanisms employed by the characters were exposed. It was also observed that the maximisation of the defence mechanisms was a response to threats and anxiety which combined to shape their actions. Isiwu, equally, observed a consistent conflict between Ifemelu's id and superego, and because her id seemed to gain control over her superego, it was natural for her to prioritize her curiosity, and undermine whatever consequences which her decisions could bring about. Interconnections of race, gender, and class, and the corresponding difficulties they present to African immigrants in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* had come under the perspective of Nebeife and Kanu following their observation of a correlation between neurosis and unresolved social based problems like gender stereotypes, racial discrimination, economic exploitations, feeling of being hated and a sense of

disillusionment. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, they argued that the emotional barriers which confront the migrants in playing participatory roles in their new environments had traumatic consequences on them.

It is stating the obvious that although Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* are transnational texts that had come under diverse scholarly perspectives, the area of topographic border crossing has not received adequate attention, thus, the knowledge of border poetics through which the push and pull factors that shape migration discourse could be understood is unharnessed. This study is meant to recover this critical component of the scholarship on the two novels.

Theoretical Frameworks

'Borders', a concept that is domiciled in environmental discourse, specifically, in geography, is concerned with the relations which nations of the world share with one another, the common boundaries that promote oneness among them, and the same territorial landscapes that divide them. The 1980s witnessed a profound transformation in the understanding of borders which could be adduced to globalisation. Border crossing denotes a transnational migration of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and because of its socio-political and economic significance, interests of scholars in literary criticisms (e.g. Schimanski, 2006; David Newman, 2006, Anssi Paasi, 2009 & Mary-Jane Okolie, 2019) have been drawn to border discourse. These scholars note that border discourse regurgitates from geopolitics, which explains its interdisciplinary nature.

Significantly, Wilson and Donnans contribute that border studies borrow from various disciplines while defying categorisation within a single field (6). For Johansen, "the globality of the border experience and the several different approaches to border is what makes border theory so intricate" (9). Following the significant shift in the study of borders around the 1980s, Stephen Wolfe and Johan Schmanski conceptualised the idea of border poetics as a concept in literary criticism, and propose that it is "any approach to texts which connects borders on the levels of 'histoire', the world of the text presented to the reader, and of 'recit', the text itself as a weave of rhetorical figures and narratives structures". In other words, it attends to two kinds of spaces "the presented space" (the world in the text) and "the space of presentation" (the text as a part of the world). In both spaces, we may find borders of a topologic or topographic nature which could be national borders or the borders between chapters in a book" (51). Because Johan Schmanski advances five planes of border studies as temporal border crossing, symbolic border crossing, epistemological border crossing, topographic border crossing and textual border crossing, this study explores the nuances of topographic border crossing in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* from the critical lens of Johan Schimanski's topographical border crossing theory. Significantly, topographic borders are the spatial

aspects of borders, whether physical or imaginary. These borders exist in all border manifestations and are necessary for comprehending border crossing.

Topographic border crossing entails traversing physical or imaginary regions which is a necessary part of crossing any border. Topographic borders in literary texts are often analysed in terms of physical areas, but it is vital to recognise the concept's flexibility and potential applicability to fictional or metaphorical spaces. Topographic borders are physical boundaries delineated by things such as fences, walls, or rivers. In simpler terms, topographic borders refer to the actual and imaginary places that borders inhabit, as well as how they are depicted in literature. It is a way to analyse how borders are portrayed in texts and how they shape our understanding of space and identity (56).

According to Johansen Catherine, border poetics offers a new point of access to the world of literature, providing a novel way of analysing literary texts that have received a wide range of criticism already. For her, border theory "can contribute to an alternate reading and analysis of novels through decades that have been read by thousands of individuals, readers and critics" (7). Based on this perception, the search for a novel way of analysing literary texts is what informs our analysis of Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*. Johan Schmanski opines that border poetics is "any approach to texts which connects borders on the levels of 'histoire', the world of the text presented to the reader, and of 'recit', the text itself as a weave of rhetorical figures and narrative structures".

In other words, border poetics attends to two kinds of spaces "the presented space" (the world in the text) and "the space of presentation" (the text as a part of the world). In these spaces we may find borders of a topological or topographical nature, either that they are national borders or the borders between chapters in a book." (51). Johan Schmanski argues that crossing transnational boundaries are in themselves important events in the life of a person as is often the case in "economically or politically-forced migration and exile" (48). He also notes that "a person crossing from one territory to another crosses a topographical, but also a temporal border; and this temporal border, in being designated a border, figures time as an imaginary topography" (53). This implies that crossing transnational boundaries can be significant events in a person's life, particularly in cases of economically forced migration, which signifies leaving one's home country due to economic hardship, poverty, or lack of opportunities.

Equally, topographic migration could come on the heels of forced migration which could be informed by socio-cultural and political factors like fleeing persecution, war and political unrest in one's home country and, also a consequence of exile. These experiences can shape a person's identity, worldview, and a sense of belonging, making border crossing a pivotal moment in their life's journey. Johan Schmanski also argues that when someone crosses from one territory to another, they do not only cross a physical (topographic) border but also a temporal one. This temporal border

represents a transition from one time frame to another, and by designating it as a border, time is imagined as a spatial landscape (topography). More significantly, time is not just a linear progression but a terrain that can be traversed, much like physical space.

Following the socio-cultural and political factors that drive migration and their significance to humanity, Lee Everette advanced a Push and Pull framework which addresses these factors as they influence transnational migration. Given that migration implicates a permanent or semi-permanent movement of individuals or groups from one geographical location to another, resulting in a change of residence and often involving a shift in cultural, social, and economic contexts, insights from Lee Everette's Push and Pull framework were harnessed for this study in order to address the socio-cultural and political factors that drive migration, the challenges encumbered in topographical border crossing and the socio-cultural factors that challenge immigrants in their new places of residence. Interestingly, human migration has been a persistent and inherent part of human history, dating back to the earliest days of human existence. In ancient times, people moved in search of basic necessities like food, safety, and security. As society evolved and urbanisation and industrialization emerged, migration continued to play a crucial role, driven by new factors like economic opportunities and city growth. Throughout human history, migration has been a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Certain factors influence the processes of migration which are represented in the two texts under review but which have not been investigated from the approach adopted in this study.

According to Lee Everette, the motivation to migrate is influenced by the interplay between Push and Pull factors, which affect the relationship between the origin and destination. He notes that "push factors are conditions that can force people to leave their homes and are related to the country from which a person migrates". Push factors, present at the origin (home country), drive individuals to leave their original country due to lack of opportunities, resources, unfavourable conditions, limited jobs, limited access to education, or political freedom.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using a border poetics framework to analyse the selected literary texts. The primary data comprised Adichie's *Americanah* and Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*. These texts were chosen because they addressed the social issues that characterised migration in the African states and their representation of migration and geographical settings as topographic border crossings, and they were analysed using a close reading technique with a focus on identifying and interpreting the theme of migration used in the representation of topographic border crossing.

Topographic Undercurrents of Migration in the Two Novels

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, the protagonist Ifemelu's migration to the United States is driven by various push factors rooted in her home country, Nigeria. Economic hardship and education system that are considered poor in standard and quality, and which is also flawed by frequent academic strikes are the push factors that informed Ifemelu's decision to seek better opportunities abroad. Her desire for personal growth, cultural exploration, and academic excellence also plays significant roles in her migration. The regular industrial actions by the Nigeria's university teachers are depicted in Auntie Uju's conversations with Ifemelu in which she is told that universities are shut down due to the many months of two industrial actions in quick succession (103).

The above conversation between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu underscores the impacts of Nigeria's academic system on Ifemelu's migration. When Auntie Uju inquires about the strike, Ifemelu reveals that another strike has begun shortly after the previous one ended. Auntie Uju then suggests that Ifemelu should pursue her studies in the United States of America where she could secure a scholarship. This conversation highlights the push factors that drive Ifemelu's migration, primarily her strong desire for education and the inadequacies of the Nigerian academic system and the failure of the government to address the welfare of lecturers, as well as improve the teaching and learning conditions in the ivory towers. Consequently, Ifemelu begins to dream of a great opportunity in America. Initially, Ifemelu envisions America as a land of freedom and comfort, but upon arrival, she confronts the harsh realities of racism. This narrative explores the complexities of migration, highlighting the tensions between the perceived promise of a new land and the challenges that await migrants.

In contrast to *Americanah*, Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* features a protagonist who migrates from America to Africa. Ishmael Fofona, an African American detective, relocates from the United States to Kenya, driven by push factors such as racial injustice and social prejudice against African Americans. The narrative begins with Ishmael travelling to Kenya to investigate the murder of a blonde girl on the porch of Joshua Hakizimana, a black professor of genocide. In the excerpt from *Nairobi Heat*, "...look here Joshua, you might be some sort of hero, but in this country, they won't think twice about taking your life for the girl's...you're a nigger here, like me or the guy they shot forty-one times in New York (25)", it is represented that the life of a black man is not valued and regarded as much as that of the whites as evidenced in the murder of Macy Admanzah, in which Joshua Hakizimana becomes the prime suspect simply because he is black.

Again, in the investigation, Ishmael reflects on the systemic injustices faced by African Americans, noting that he is dispatched from America to Africa because the crime involved a white victim. He sarcastically advises black criminals to only target blacks, as crimes against whites are prioritised and profiled by the state. This highlights the racial disparity in the criminal judicial system where black lives are deemed inferior

and offered limited opportunities. Ugwueze corroborates that a crime should be treated as a crime, regardless of the perpetrator or victim and that injustice should be addressed with equal urgency, regardless of the individuals involved (21). This emphasises the need for a colour-blind approach to justice, where equal treatment is afforded to all, regardless of race.

Significantly, Lee Everette recognises that Pull factors are the positive aspects of a location that attract individuals to migrate or move there. They are the opposite of push factors, which drive people away from their current location. Pull factors are present in "destination" (host country) which attract immigrants, they can include: better job opportunities and living conditions, availability of land for settlement and agriculture, political and religious freedom, superior education and welfare systems, improved transportation and communication infrastructure, access to quality healthcare, a stress-free and secure environment. These pull factors can make a place more appealing and attractive to individuals, encouraging them to migrate or move there to improve the quality of life. Lee Everette suggests that individuals considering migration should have a deep understanding of their current location which would enable them to make informed decisions about their community.

In contrast, the knowledge of their destination is often limited and inaccurate with some aspects only becoming apparent through personal experiences. This distinction leads to a significant information gap between the origin and destination locations. As a result, migrants inevitably face uncertainty and apprehension about their reception in the new area which could be shrouded in mystery. This lack of knowledge creates unease and doubt about what to expect in the new environment. Prior to his sojourn in Nairobi, Ishmael harboured a misguided perception of Africa, viewing it as a continent plagued by "wars, hunger, disease, and dirt" (7). Despite his awareness of his African ancestry as an African American, he never considered visiting the continent or identifying with his people. However, upon crossing the physical border at Nairobi's airport, Ishmael embarked on a journey of cultural and psychological self-discovery which prompted him to reconnect with his roots (Udeh, 29). Notably, a taxi driver's reference to him as "Mzungu" (meaning, "white man") at the airport sparks a sense of discomfort in Ishmael who felt it is incongruous for a black African to label him as such. This experience marked the beginning of his grappling with complex issues of identity, race, and belongingness. Thus, Ishmael's migration to Africa is a poignant journey of self-discovery and identity formation. He is drawn to the continent to re-establish a connection with his ancestral roots, cultural heritage, and traditions which he believes are vital to understanding his sense of self and purpose. As an African American, Ishmael has experienced a profound disconnection from his cultural legacy due to the historical impacts of slavery, colonization, and systemic racism. His journey to Africa seeks to bridge this gap, reclaim his heritage, and find a sense of belonging and direction. Upon the completion of his detective mission in Nairobi, Ishmael develops a new perception of Africa and when Chief asks him about

Africa, he confidently gives positive comments (153-55). This encounter has perceptibly altered his preconceptions about Africa at the beginning of the novel. He advises the police chief that the only way to know Africa is to go, see and interact with the people of Africa.

While in Kenya, Ishmael begins to assert himself as a black man whose root is Africa. He disdains ever being called by the name "Mzungu", a term which translates to white man. He wonders what kind of hypocrisy would make even his fellow black man call him a white man. He loathes such description, a description he perceives as hypocritical and deceptive (Udeh, 22). Through his experiences in Kenya, Ishmael negotiates complex questions about identity, race, culture, and belongingness, and ultimately seeking to reconcile his dual identities as both African and American. His story serves as a powerful exploration of the intricacies of identity and the universal human quest for meaning, connection, and purpose.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, the protagonist Ifemelu is drawn to migrate to the United States by various pull factors. Firstly, the prospects of higher education beckon, as she secures a scholarship to study in the US, seeking to circumvent the limitations of Nigeria's underdeveloped educational system. Additionally, economic motivations play a significant role as Ifemelu aspires to achieve financial independence and capitalise on the perceived superior employment opportunities in America, hoping to secure a well-paying job. The promise of a more stable financial future in the US contrasts starkly with the economic instability in Nigeria where even graduates often struggle to find employment. Furthermore, Ifemelu's desire for personal growth and cultural enrichment serves as another pull factor, as she is attracted to the idea of experiencing a new culture and broadening her perspectives.

Upon arrival in America, Ifemelu encounters firsthand, the harsh realities of racism which forced her to confront her own black identity in a way she had never done before. Prior to her migration, she has idealised America as a land of plenty, freedom, and boundless opportunities, but her experiences proved starkly different. They are only given the menial and deplorable jobs not because they are not qualified but because they are black immigrants. This is the fate suffered by Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and other black characters in the American society of the novel: "...It is about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair" (387), "I did not think of myself as black and I only became Black when I came to America" (335).

Ifemelu's skin becomes a significant obstacle to her success as systemic racism in American society hinders her efforts to secure stable employment and financial stability. Despite her best efforts and struggles to secure a well-paying job, her job applications are consistently met with outright rejection. In a desperate bid to make ends meet, Opeyemi, Ajibola observes that Ifemelu reluctantly accepts a demeaning offer from a tennis coach which objectifies and sexualises her (Ajibola, 123).

Conclusion

This study has interrogated a critical issue of migration as a manifestation of topographic border crossing in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Mukomawa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*. While previous scholarly studies had investigated these texts through various theoretical frameworks, including post-colonialism, feminism, quest motif, themes, and narrative strategies, a notable gap exists in the applications of Johan Schimanski's Topographic border model which is a component of Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe's Border Poetics, and Lee Everette's Push and Pull frameworks for the present study. By adopting these frameworks, the present study was able to examine the motivations behind the migrations of Ifemelu and Ishmael, the protagonists of *Americanah* and *Nairobi Heat*, respectively. The analysis revealed that Ifemelu's migration was primarily driven by push factors, notably the inadequate academic system in Nigeria, while pull factors such as access to superior education, enhanced job prospects, and cultural enrichment in America, as perceived through her readings, attracted her to the United States.

Conversely, Ishmael's migration from the United States to Kenya was influenced by push factors like racial prejudice and social injustice, while his quest for identity served as a pull factor that attracted him to Africa. Through the application of Lee Everette's theory, it was observed that migrants often possess incomplete or inaccurate information about their idolised migrant country, which this study has critically, highlighted, and additionally, interrogating the significance of this phenomenon in the context of migration studies.

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